

Reading the Bible Positively

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Abstract

In the early '60s, it began to emerge, in Latin America and Brazil, political movements that sought to raise awareness about their situation of oppression and the need for ruptures with the dominant society. The Bible had been given to the people and was read from the experience and reality of men and women in situations of oppression. The situations of oppression and exclusion experienced in Latin America broaden the understanding about the poor and the excluded and challenges new readings of the Bible from each context. Prejudice and stigma affects the lives of people with HIV, causing them suffering. The situation of social vulnerability affecting a major portion of this population complicates the lives of these people even further. We seek to read the Bible through the context of lives of women with HIV by using popular bible reading methodology. This article bring some introductions reflection on the method and on the experience of a women group in Brazil.

Keywords: HIV and Aids; popular Bible reading; reading Bible positively; Casa Fonte Colombo

The issue of HIV and AIDS has been the object of my research for some time now. I started researching the topic during my graduation, influenced by my supervisor of the research project I was part of. The readings aroused the interested in the subject and a desire to meet people living with HIV and AIDS. Therefore, for my master's, we searched for institutions that carried out some work for these people. We aimed to know the work of the institution in order to verify to what extent the work done by them could be related to pastoral care, besides, as far as possible, to establish a direct contact with people making use of this service.

Health services had been our first choice, but we met resistance when we presented ourselves as theologians. Then we found Casa Fonte Colombo - Center of support for the HIV positive person (CFC) in Porto Alegre - RS state (the work of this institution will be described along the text). Although AIDS is a public health problem, it also allows the research of other areas of knowledge. In theology, for example, one can study it from the perspective of human suffering, care and/or pastoral counseling, as well as from a perspective of a Liberating Reading of the Bible.

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The practical work at CFC occurred at the same time I was developing a research for my academic master's degree. The dissertation was entitled: "Senior Women and HIV and AIDS: Approaches From Pastoral Care." The research aimed to study the epidemic of HIV and AIDS in the experience of older women, having Pastoral Counseling as a proposal of care to work with these women. The research project for my doctorate was the result of the experience conducted with these women and the desire to take a step forward in order to contribute positively towards the lives of these women. Thus, we propose to offer them a workshop called "Contextualizing Workshop", which aims to read the Bible in a positive and liberating way, contributing to the empowerment of women who attend the institution.

Reading the Bible in any context is at the same time interesting and challenging. It is interesting, because a text written more than two thousand years ago can still be today relevant and challenging since the different contexts that challenge us to find a new meaning for a same biblical text.

Theology covers a broader field of the theme of HIV and AIDS than only issues related to HIV and AIDS and only from the technical and medical point of view. Theology looks at people who live with AIDS in their integrality. Not only the caring with health and body are important, but also the caring for the spirit. All dimensions need to be worked with so that the person may establish stable relationships again.

The work with people living with HIV/AIDS is undoubtedly challenging since one cannot really know how the virus affects the life of the individual living with HIV/AIDS, neither can we understand in what way the stigma and prejudice affects and transforms the life of those people. Schneider-Harpprecht states, "nobody can feel someone else's pain, nor understand what worries a person who is ill and what are his/her needs".² What is true for other disease is also true for AIDS. We can only get closer and put ourselves beside the one who suffers, being solidary with him/her, showing respect, as a way to soften the suffering.

Many advances have already been reached in the sense of increasing the quality of life of people living with HIV/AIDS in Brazil, as for example, the facilitated access to health services, free access to anti-retroviral medication, welfare rights and free transport.³ The public policies had as a goal interrupting the transmission of the virus and, secondly, delay as much as possible the development of the immunodeficiency or opportunistic diseases.⁴ Through the use of antiretroviral medications,

² Schneider-Harpprecht, Christoph. *Como acompanhar doentes*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1994. p. 13.

³ Oliveira, José Marcelo Domingos. *A prevenção à AIDS e o desafio da ação intersetorial: Discussão preliminar*. In: Bernardi, José (Org.). *Vulnerabilidade social e AIDS: o desafio da prevenção em tempos de pauperização da epidemia*. Porto Alegre: CNBB; Pastoral de DST/AIDS: 2005, p. 88.

⁴ Opportunistic infection or opportunistic disease is the pathology that a person with a disease that promotes a difficulty of cellular immunological answer by the body may develop. "[...] Therefore, the

freely distributed, people who live with HIV/AIDS gained quality of life, since the medication diminished the action of the virus in the body. Besides the distribution of medication, hospital services were guaranteed to the people with the virus.⁵ Currently, more than 210.00 people have access to medication distributed by the Brazilian government. Since 1996 the medication has been available to everyone.⁶

Brazil has been praised for its HIV/AIDS health and prevention program for having a diversity antiretroviral medication, besides guaranteeing the access to these medications for free to the people who need them. This way, people who live with HIV/AIDS have an increased quality of life, which resulted in a decrease of the mortality rates of people living with HIV/AIDS.⁷

Nevertheless, “despite the notable advances in the antiretroviral treatment, people with HIV still face an entire life of therapy with the known consequences and toxicities unknown in long-term”.⁸ Many people face difficulties in adhering to the treatment and end up abandoning it. The side effects caused by the medications such as “lipodystrophy, the risk of cardiovascular diseases, dyslipidemia, hyperglycemia are complementary factors of living with HIV/AIDS and can reinforce social isolation”.⁹ Furthermore, the use of medication demands a correct nutrition and, often, people live in extreme vulnerable social situations where there is not the necessary food.

Researches in search of a cure are still being made and are necessary. “We must not and cannot continue accepting that HIV is a chronic disease that implicates the patients with a treatment for the rest of their lives”.¹⁰ Despite of all the efforts, to support millions of people with the antiretroviral treatment in unsustainable and impracticable, since “for each two people who start the therapy today, it is estimated that three more will get infected”.¹¹

opportunistic infections are diseases that take a non-common situation to manifest” (MACKERT, Ciane. *Deu positivo. E agora doutor? HIV-AIDS: as perguntas que ainda permanecem depois de anos.* Rio de Janeiro: Wak, 2009. p. 59).

⁵ Bernardi, 2005, p. 87.

⁶ Lunardi, Luiz Carlos; Bernardi, José. *Igreja e aids: muito além do amor.* Porto Alegre, RS: Pastoral de DST/Aids - CNBB, 2008, p. 112.

⁷ Brasil. Ministério da Saúde. *Boletim epidemiológico AIDS e DST - 27ª a 52ª - semanas epidemiológicas - jul./dez. 2009 / 01ª a 26ª semanas epidemiológicas - jan./jun. 2011.* Ano VII, n. 01. Brasília: 2011. Disponível em: <http://www.aids.gov.br/sites/default/files/anexos/publicacao/2011/50652/boletim_aids_2011_preliminar3_pdf_20265.pdf>. Acesso em: 29 abr. 2012.

⁸ Higheyman, Liz. *A erradicação do HIV: Tempo de falar sobre cura.* Janeiro-Junho de 2011. Traduzido e condensado do Boletim BETA. *Boletim Vacinas anti HIV/AIDS*, n. 26, março de 2012, p. 33.

⁹ Andrade; Silva; Santos, 2010, p. 714.

¹⁰ Higheyman, 2012, p. 32.

¹¹ Higheyman, 2012, p. 33.

To have an idea of how the epidemiological situation in Brazil is nowadays I present some data. According to the Brazilian Epidemiological Report, since the beginning of the epidemic in 1980 to June 2011 608.230 cases of AIDS were registered. In Brazil the situation has been considered stable, although it is far from being comfortable. Just in 2011 there were 38.776 new cases of AIDS (20,2% per 100 thousand inhabitants), from these 24.379 cases in men and 14.388 in women.¹²

The high number of people who are infected with the HIV virus annually is disturbing. The rates of people contaminated vary from one region to the other. The high rates presented in the southern region of the country, especially in Porto Alegre, draw attention. From the data, it is possible to observe that the situation in Rio Grande do Sul is alarming, since it has the highest incidence rate registered in the country in 2011: 40.2 per 100 thousand inhabitants. Since June 2012, in Rio Grande do Sul, 2.010 cases of AIDS were notified, making it the state in the southern region with the higher rate of new registered cases. Porto Alegre leads as a city with the higher incidence rate among Brazilian cities with more than 100 thousand inhabitants. In 2011, the incidence rate was 95.3 per 100 thousand inhabitants.¹³ Millions of people in the world may be living with the virus and not know that they are contaminated which enables the virus to be transmitted to other people when the lack of consciousness about the use of condoms in sexual relations is present. However, “we have to give to the HIV the real dimension it has, not allowing the fear, the prejudice and the phantasies to turn it into something gigantic and stifle the basic principles of living together among the individuals in community”.¹⁴ People who live with HIV/AIDS cannot be seen only as the disease, but as a human being in his/her integrality.

The being who lives with HIV/AIDS needs to be seen as a citizen in his/her full capacity and worthy of respect, love and understanding and be envisioned, essentially, as human being who needs affection, kindness, attention, respect and care. It is believed that the prejudice and the discrimination, still much associated with the epidemic, promote the differentiation in the caring for the being with HIV/AIDS, making difficult, many times, his/her autonomy, dignity and wellbeing, opposing, this way, the essence of the humane and solidary care.¹⁵

¹² Brasil. Ministério da Educação. Boletim epidemiológico AIDS-DST Versão Preliminar. Ano VIII. Versão preliminar julho de 2011 a junho de 2012. Brasília: 2012. Disponível em: <http://www.aids.gov.br/sites/default/files/anexos/publicacao/2012/52654/boletim_jornalistas_pdf_22172.pdf>. Acessado em 15 fev. 2013.

¹³ Brasil, 2012.

¹⁴ Pacheco, Maria Beatriz Dreyer. Direitos humanos e AIDS: o enfoque da pessoa que vive com HIV. In: Padoin, Stela Maris de Mello (Org.). Experiências interdisciplinares em AIDS: interfaces de uma epidemia. Santa Maria, UFSM, 2006, p. 20.

¹⁵ Paula, Cristiane Cardoso; Schaurich, Diego. O cuidado em tempo de AIDS. In: Padoin, Stela Maris

Stigma and prejudice influence the life of people who live with HIV/AIDS. Their routine is modified in consequence of the disease. Besides suffering with the disease, the symptoms that manifest with more intensity throughout time, the treatment and the fear of death that is closer, they suffer even with the prejudice of the people around them. In many cases, the family itself turns away increasing even more the suffering. The social death¹⁶ that HIV/AIDS causes brings more suffering than the fear of death in consequence of the disease. In conversations with the women who attend CFC, some have reported being driven away from work, other needed to change neighborhood to avoid problems with the neighbors and besides all that the life with the family and friends is limited.

The blaming and association of the disease with divine punishments is many times reinforced by society. In the case of HIV/AIDS, this association of the disease with divine punishment was strengthened¹⁷. The disease is seen as something that the person deserved. Besides suffering with the fears that the disease brings with it, because it is a disease without cure and that can be transmitted to other people, the individual also suffers with the feeling of guilt for having exposed himself/herself to the disease, besides feeling abandoned by all and also by God.¹⁸

Reading the Bible positively – The Popular Reading of the Bible methodology

In the early '60s, in Latin America, as well as in Brazil, there is the event of political movements that sought to raise people's awareness of their situation of oppression and the need to establish ruptures with the dominant society. At that time, only the scholars had access to biblical texts and the Bible was used to justify oppressive situations.

The involvement of the churches in the political relations required new forms of reading the Bible. The reality of oppression started to awaken the desire for liberation and the Bible was no longer used to justify the exploitation of the people. "Since 1968, a grassroots work started and all over base communities emerged. The people started to read the Bible".¹⁹

de Mello. Experiências interdisciplinares em AIDS: interfaces de uma epidemia. Santa Maria: UFSM, 2006, p. 105.

¹⁶ SONTAG, Susan. Doença como metáfora: AIDS e suas metáforas. São Paulo: Companhia de Bolso, 2007, p. 104.

¹⁷ Padilha, Anivaldo; Almeida, Ester L. L. Koinonia Presença Ecumênica E Serviço. AIDS E Igrejas: um convite à ação. Rio de Janeiro: Koinonia Presença Ecumênica e Serviço, [200-], p.33.

¹⁸ Clifford, P. La teología cristiana y la epidemia VIH/SIDA. Buenos Aires: Epifania, 2005, p. 3.

¹⁹ Mesters, Carlos; Orofino, Francisco Rodrigues. Sobre a Leitura Popular da Bíblia no Brasil. Disponível em: <<http://www.cebi.org.br/noticia.php?secaold=12¬iciald=132>> Acesso em: 03 nov. 2012.

From the work with the poor emerged the Ecclesiastical Base Communities. Those communities were formed by lay people that gathered with the goal of reading the Bible. This community model spread throughout Brazil and, “in the communities, all over, Biblical Circles, reflection groups, gospel groups, celebrations of the Word emerged”.²⁰

The Ecclesiastical Base Communities developed a new way of reading the Bible, based on the See-Judge-Act method. This method discovered a new way of being Church within the world. The Bible was read from the context of the poor, the life of the people.

Before seeking to know what God said in the past, it seeks to See the situation of the people today, their problems. Then, with the help of the texts of the Bible, it seeks to Judge this situation. This causes that, little by little, God’s speech does not come only from the Bible anymore, but also from the facts enlightened by the Bible. And it is them, the facts, that this way become the transmitters of God’s Word and that lead to Act in a new way.²¹

The Bible had reached the hands of the people. Poor people from the communities read the Bible from their living and faith reality. As they read the biblical texts they say their histories being told in them. The people of God presented in the Bible were oppressed the same way they were. An experience of God and of life is born. Their struggles were not different from the current struggles. They sought “land, justice, sharing, fraternity, human life”. The political dimension of faith starts to appear, the dimension that fights for people’s rights, for social justice and equality.

The Popular Reading of the Bible, “seeks to restore the Bible’s historical and spiritual original sense, from God’s presence and revelation in the world of the poor and due to God’s Word discernment and communication”.²² Thus, it is a militant reading, animated by the spirit, that has as a first goal the social transformation, in the search for more far and egalitarian society, witnessing this way the presence of the Kingdom of God.

The process of popular reading of the Bible has to be carried out from the living experience and reality of the people, has to be done with the people and be and represent the reading of the people. The popular reading of the Bible has to take place in the community. It reflects its practice and gives it a new meaning.

The popular reading of the Bible’s method does not dismiss the study of exegesis. Once it is through this study that it is possible to restore the history of the people, get to know the context in which the biblical text was written and the different translations. In the same way it is important to restore the history of the biblical texts it is also important to know the history of the current context. “Working with

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Richard, Pablo. *Leitura popular da Bíblia na América Latina (Hermenêutica da libertação)*. Ribla n. 1 - 1988/1. Petrópolis: Vozes: São Paulo: Imprensa Metodista; São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1988, p. 8.

the Bible historically enlightens the Bible as a whole and clears each period and the moment of life of the people that becomes more understandable to us".²³ Through this historical restoration of the biblical texts, we notice God's action in history and the changes in the structures that took place throughout time. By noticing how God acted throughout history, it is possible to notice how God acts today.

When the people read the biblical text from their reality it gets another meaning. "The people understand the biblical text when it can enlighten its own reality with it. The text is understood when through it the world of God is revealed in history".²⁴ The people identify in the biblical history their own history, identify the same problems, the same challenges and notice that if God acted among the poor people in the biblical text, God can also act in the same way in their lives.

According to Mesters, "those three elements together 'Reality – Community – Bible' help to accomplish a correct interpretation, which ultimate goal, is not interpreting the Bible, but interpret life with the help of the Bible".²⁵ The Bible will be the instrument that will help to interpret the current reality, in search of elements that can contribute for social transformation to take place.

The popular reading of the Bible process' goal is to reveal God today in the journey of the people. From their current reality it questions the biblical text, at the same time the biblical text helps to lighten the current situation. The interpretation of the biblical text starts from the current problems and questions, from the faith experience of the community and from the history reported in the biblical text.²⁶ The biblical text when interpreted helps to make real our faith.

The interpretation of the biblical text needs to be in accordance with the reality of the people. In order for that to be accomplished, it is necessary to know well the context for whom the text will be directed to. It is necessary to know the political, social and cultural problems. "The only ones that listen well to the text are the ones who know how to listen to the real questions of the people. With the questions of the people in the head and in the eyes, the text is enlightened in another way".²⁷ It is necessary to put oneself in the place of the poor, the woman, the elderly, the person living with HIV and AIDS to understand their conflicts and needs.

The popular reading of the Bible intends to be a method that helps the people to become subjects of their own history. We need to teach people to be autonomous, giving them freedom to create their own interpretations. Helping them so that they do not depend on us, being able to find solutions for the social problems where they live

²³ Pereira; Mesters, 1994, p. 22.

²⁴ Richard, 1988, p. 15.

²⁵ Pereira; Mesters, 1994, p. 31.

²⁶ Pereira; Mesters, 1994, p. 27.

²⁷ Pereira; Mesters, 1994, p. 33.

and seeking the transformation of this reality. This way, popular reading of the Bible is also a liberation action.²⁸

In the popular reading of the Bible there is not one person who teaches. There is a facilitator that only assists, makes sure the exchange of opinions takes place. All knowledges are important and all opinions and reflections have to be valued. The role of the facilitator is to induce the discussion and not to give ready answers.²⁹

When the people discuss the biblical text they discuss at the same time their own reality, their very life history is reflected in the text. The histories get mixed and complement each other. The Bible enlightens life and life helps to understand the Bible.³⁰ The goal of the popular reading of the Bible with the people “is not to interpret the Bible, but to interpret life with the help of the Bible”.³¹ It is necessary to bring the biblical text to the present, only then it gets a new meaning.

The methodology used in the popular reading of the Bible does not follow in itself a structure. It works like a conversation. An exchange of ideas about the biblical text. There is room for all. The facilitator has to mediate the conversation, making sure that all participate, inducing the discussion through questions and clarifying eventual doubts.³² “What matters most is not the ‘technique’ of how to hold a biblical circle, but the sharing attitude, the spiritual disposition of being alert to God’s manifestation in life, through the light of his Word, in order to be able to say: ‘He is among us’”.³³

Through this experience we learn that ordinary people also have something to teach us. “One only needs to give them the opportunity to say their own word”.³⁴ Those are different knowledges, that start from another point of view. Their knowledge starts from their daily experience, in their community, in their neighborhood, in their family. It is not a scientific knowledge, as the one done in colleges, but a knowledge that reflects their practice. Popular education proposed an exchange of knowledges.

²⁸ Araújo, Luiz Carlos. Metodologia de aprendizagem bíblica: avaliando as instâncias de formação do Cebi. São Leopoldo: Cebi, 2007, p. 13.

²⁹ Araújo, 2007, p. 19.

³⁰ Mesters, 1991, p. 31.

³¹ Mesters, 1991, p. 37.

³² Mesters, 1991, p. 127.

³³ Cavalcanti, Tereza Maria Pompéia. A Leitura Popular da Bíblia e a V Conferência do CELAM. Atualidade Teológica. Ano XI, nº 25, janeiro/abril 2007, p. 92. Available at: <[³⁴ Dreher, Carlos A. A caminho de Emaús: leitura bíblica e educação popular. Belo Horizonte: Cebi, 1993, p. 16.](http://www.maxwell.lambda.ele.puc-rio.br/18583/18583.PDFXvmi=pTITSA7sezrcsJevmvEXmtcP7f7SL61b1m6TXdmcMOpfzEMWaqUwV8n4nuW9CXIDlrjGVwsLWJIBwiMZekUmIZLeWVQUhuhK4Bq09UM7F8lcrvbGQ74A-6P03LGZ4bgPgSgg3c3aRcT5EphkooRvfhA2nz7AQWQKe7NqbXjnSo3iGoB60sC4ac7xMe9Eb-Opp8eRkdbJ6AMohb0n0t15Fece1qnGDo64wVRz7BFlo50A6oBApGfESuGkSnXhu2P>”. Accessed on: 03 nov. 2012, p. 96.</p>
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In the popular reading of the Bible method “it matters to help people to say their own word. Without forgetting that we also need to learn it”.³⁵ In the workshop carried out the CFC we encourage women to reflect about their reality, to say what they think, what they feel. During the moment of sharing, of the exchanging of ideas about the text the women identify with the characters, and relate these characters and biblical stories people and happenings in their own lives, situations that happen to them during the week. The Contextualizing Workshop is a space where we seek to read the Bible in a positive and liberating way.

Reading the Bible positively in the context of HIV/AIDS

During the Masters’ program³⁶ in the midst of readings about HIV/AIDS I found a text written in South Africa entitled “Reading Job positively in the context of South Africa”.³⁷ The text dealt with the reading of the Bible among people who live with HIV/AIDS, especially a new reading about the book on Job. The text caught my attention when I saw it and sparked my interest.

The theology that we know in the book of Job and that can also be seen in other texts of the Old Testament is the theology of retribution. According to this theology, people reap what they sow, i.e., people are responsible for what happens in their lives³⁸. The text of West and Zengele establish a relationship between the text of Job, where there is the predominant idea of retribution, and AIDS, as a punishment from God for the sins committed by the individual. The paper proposes a positive reading of the text of Job. It describes the reading of the text in a group of people living with AIDS and how they interpret the attitudes of Job, the friends of Job, suffering, sin and the image of God that the text features and what is important to them.

Thinking about the biblical texts in the context of HIV/AIDS is challenging. As previously mentioned, it is not possible to know what the other feels, we can only imagine what the person thinks or feels in this situation, but it will always be a look that starts from another point of view. In order to care and help people “it is necessary to understand the human being in his/her life context, in his/her joys, anxieties, fears, uncertainties and hopes”.³⁹ Based on the experience described in the text of West and Zengele, we have proposed “Contextualizing Workshop” to happen Casa Fonte Colombo.

³⁵ Dreher, 1993, p. 13.

³⁶ Schroder, Elisa Fenner. *Mulheres idosas e o HIV/AIDS: abordagens a partir do cuidado pastoral*. São Leopoldo: ESTPPG, 2012.

³⁷ West, Gerald; Zengele, Bongj. Lendo Jó 'positivamente' no contexto de HIV/AIDS na África do Sul. *Concilium*, n. 307, 2004, p. 126-141.

³⁸ West, Zengele, 2004, p. 129.

³⁹ Paula; Schaurich, 2006, p. 103.

It was necessary to get to know their reality in order to be able to speak about it more properly. This way I found the Casa Fonte Colombo – Centro de Promoção da Pessoa Soropositiva-HIV [Columbus Fountain House – Center for the Promotion of the Seropositive-HIV Person] in Porto Alegre. The institution is coordinated by Capuchin Friars and welcomes people in a situation of social vulnerability living with HIV. The Casa Fonte Colombo contributes in the struggle against prejudice and discrimination, in the rescue of the person's dignity, in the control of the epidemic, in the social reinsertion and in the restructuring of the family through the work carried out by volunteers.⁴⁰

At Casa Fonte Colombo, the users⁴¹ find a space for living together, receive information about prevention and treatment, medical referrals, besides receiving the donation of food and clothes, as well as psychological and pastoral care, besides massages, reiki, haircut, distribution of clothes, bath and have the opportunity to take part in workshops guided by volunteers in which the goal is to improve the self-esteem and empowering of the users. Those activities are developed with the support of volunteers, in which each one works with what she knows how to do.

Restoring the dignity of people and increase the quality of life of the ones who live with HIV/AIDS is one of the goals of the Casa Fonte Colombo. Because of that, it offers services that are able to help those people to live a more dignified life. It is important to remember that the institution cannot do this alone. It needs people to be aware that the increasing of their quality of life depends on them. Therefore, every month there are meetings of the “Adhering Group” where they work motivational themes concerning prevention, health care, pension rights and others.

At the institution I found a space where I could talk to people and this way get to know their reality, their difficulties, their fear and traumas. The initial goal was to establish a dialogue, listen carefully and assist insofar as the conversations became more intimate. From these conversations we got to know, for example, that many of them were infected by their partners, with whom they had long term relationships, others told how they felt when receiving the result of the exam. Conversations about the difficulties in adhering to the treatment, in the relationships with the family, children; how to tell they have AIDS to their new partners. Fear of the unknown, fear of death, anger and feelings of abandonment are some of the main feelings cited by them. The difficulty to adhere to the treatment due to side effects or even to not finding the motivation to continue living are reported by the users. Another difficulty relates to relationships with family, children, friends, neighbors; how and when to

⁴⁰ Fonte Colombo Centro de Promoção da Pessoa Soropositiva-HIV. Relatório anual da instituição. 2011.

⁴¹ “Users” is the way the people that attend the institution are called.

tell the new partner about the disease. Those conversations are a result of the trust relationship established with the women.

When I read the text “Reading Job positively...” I was moved to put into practice this way of reading the Bible. The church discourse many times is not very welcoming as we believe it should be and ends up pushing people away from the community. Instead of a loving and merciful God we present an evil God, that punishes people for their acts. The idea that AIDS is a deserved punishment for some evil done or sin still exists.⁴² This idea that the disease is a punishment comes from the Old Testament, as we can see in the book of Job. The relation between AIDS and sexuality makes it harder to discuss this theme in religious contexts, since sexuality is still a taboo in many religious contexts and the main way of transmission of AIDS is through sexual contact⁴³.

Just as in the text “Reading Job positively” I started to question myself about the way we read the Bible. Are we able to say something that makes any sense for a person that just found out he/she is infected with HIV, who has not yet learned how to handle this situation and needs help? How many people with HIV/AIDS are part of our congregations and we don’t have the slightest idea of who they are, what they feel? What kind of judgment we emit without even realizing? What kind of God do we present to a person who suffers, since he/she believes to have sinned? I questioned myself also about how it would be if we worked the same biblical text with people who live with AIDS and people who do not live with AIDS, what differences in interpretations would we have, even if the issue of AIDS was put on the agenda purposefully? Aren’t we trying to impose the reading of specific texts and forget others?

The Contextualizing Workshop arose as an attempt to answer these questions asked above. Its goal is to introduce the participants in the basic study of the sacred texts. Presenting an overview of the history of the most known texts, seeking to make people get closer to the biblical texts and from a contextualized reflection. The theme developed in this workshop is focused on the popular reading of the Bible from the reality and daily experience of each participant. The participation of the people who take part in it is valued and encouraged, so that they may share their experiences and perceptions on the texts that are worked with in the workshop, enabling re-readings and reinterpretations of biblical passages.

The interpretation of the texts seeks to take into account the reality of the people living with HIV/AIDS. The participants are instigated to think about the texts from their own reality. The contributions and observations are valued and respected. All are invited to speak out. The participation in the workshop is free, there are already other

⁴² Sampaio, Tânia Mara Vieira. AIDS e religião: aproximações ao tema. Impulso: Revista de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Piracicaba, v. 13, n. 32, p. 21-38, 2002, p. 24.

⁴³ Padilha, Almeida, [200-], p.33.

workshops offered at the same time. We have a group ranging from 6 to 10 women. The meetings take place every two weeks and last about an hour. Women can choose the ones they most identify with, but may also choose not to participate in any of them.

Initially, some women commented they were apprehensive about what would happen in the workshop, since the Bible and religion were things that did not attract them much, maybe because they had uncomfortable experiences in the past. At the end of the first semester the reports were very positive. The way the Bible is being used in the workshop was able to get those women's attention. The biblical texts used at the meetings, in most cases, are suggested by the group. Because of lack of biblical knowledge and even because of the fact that most of them do not have a Bible at home, the choice of the texts are chosen through the suggestion of themes, as for example, women in the Bible, forgiveness, loneliness, cure, among others. The workshop is constructed in partnership with the women. Their opinion on the progress of the workshop is important. There is also a periodic evaluation on how the texts have been addressed and how they have been contributing to their lives.

We always seek to work with texts from the Old and from the New Testament. We have worked texts such as Job, the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37); the blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10.46-52); the Samaritan woman (John 4.5-42), Martha and Mary (Luke 10.38-42); Eve (Genesis 2), among other stories about women and cure. We have also worked with texts about themes such as forgiveness, loneliness, prayer, among others. The updating of the biblical texts is done from their reality. It is the women who participate in the group that, through their experience update the text. Through this experience, we as facilitators learn how to read the Bible from the point of view of women who live with HIV.

During the workshop the women share their life stories, what happens in their daily life. Then, their stories get mixed with the ones of the biblical characters or with reflections brought to the group. They reflect about their attitudes, choices, fears and faith. They reflect about the importance of their families and friends. The importance of prevention, health care and the use of medicine to safeguard their well being are mentioned. We noticed that transformations have been taking place. If in the beginning listening to a critique or a divergent opinion was stressful among them, now respect for the different is being exercised. That way, the Workshop is a space where women feel welcomed and loved. It is an empowering⁴⁴ space, since it helps women to become subjects of their own history. It has enabled those women

⁴⁴ "Empowerment" is a concept created in the last years and that points to the idea of enhancing, training and taking charge. It doesn't just mean to give power to someone, but, more than that, indicates an action in which the subject becomes an active agent as a result of an activation. Streck, Valburga. *Família e escola: em busca de condições de empoderamento*. Ciências Sociais Unisinos, São Leopoldo, v. 37, n. 158, p.187-203, 2001, p. 193.

to establish a new relationship with God, since if they feel loved by Him and in the same way establish new relationships with themselves and with their neighbor.

We can still not speak of results that the workshop may have caused in the lives of those women, however, we are able to notice that they have been valued, listened to and accepted. We have noticed their interest in biblical texts (they suggest texts and themes) and the will to learn more; they ask questions about the context in which the text was written, about the life of the characters. The women want to be listened to, valued and respected in their opinions.

We notice changes in the way they face life, their fears and the acceptance of the disease. It is still early to evaluate the real contributions of the reading of the Bible with people with HIV/AIDS, but we are confident that the work has achieved positive results. The text of Mark 5. 25, for example, shows the attitude of courage of a woman who suffered many years with a hemorrhage. She had to leave her place of suffering and take an action so that healing could occur. It took courage to touch the robe of Jesus. Just as the attitude of this woman changed her life, also the people and women of CFC are motivated to seek change in attitude. Thus, we seek to read the Bible in a positive and liberating way for and with the people living with HIV and AIDS.

The Popular Reading of the Bible is a useful instrument in the Reading of the Bible with people living with HIV/AIDS, since it enables a reading that is accomplished starting from the context and from the reading of the world of the people involved in it and what they consider important.

Brazil and South Africa are different contexts, but there are many similarities in issues related to AIDS, especially regarding stigma and prejudice that pushes people away from social interaction and from the family. The reading of the Bible in any place needs to take in account the reality of the people, starting from their context, their concerns and hopes be it in Brazil or in South Africa. The reading of the Bible will make sense to people who live with HIV/AIDS when they identify with the stories and characters reported in Scripture and in it find support to overcome or accept their situation.

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